

Bingham-Blossom House (Figulus)
1250 South Ocean Boulevard
Palm Beach
Palm Beach Co.
Florida

HABS No. FLA-221

HABS,
FLA,
50-PALM
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

BINGHAM-BLOSSOM HOUSE (Figulus)

Location: 1250 South Ocean Boulevard, Palm Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida.

Present Owners: Heirs of the Mrs. Dudley S. Blossom Estate—Mary Blossom Lee, Robert Blossom, and Donald Blossom.

Present Use: Private residence, 1971. [See 1980 Addendum, p. 13.]

Significance: This large residence, the first privately owned residence built on the ocean in Palm Beach, was an excellent example of the Shingle style, expertly adapted to the site and to the climate. Deep recessed porches, wide overhangs, and cross ventilation provide the necessary comfort without benefit of modern air conditioning. Built by one of the early settlers for some of the first of the Palm Beach winter season residents, the house was the first to be built on the ocean, and represents the pioneer stage of Palm Beach development. The grounds contain many tropical trees brought from around the world by Dr. David Grandison Fairchild, noted botanist and friend of the family, and organizer of the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Plant Introduction in Miami 1906.NR 1972.

PART I. PHYSICAL HISTORY

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1893.
2. Architect: The only information concerning the erection of the house appears in A Long Way Forward, by David Loth, in which the following statement appears: " . . . last leg of the trip, down Lake Worth and through a canal to their own dock at the house George Lainhart had built for them." Additional information from George D. Lainhart of the Lainhart & Potter Lumber Co., Palm Beach, indicates that his grandfather, George W. Lainhart, was a carpenter, who built the entire house for Charles William Bingham and his wife Mary Payne Bingham in 1893.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Dr. R. B. Potter owned the land before the Bingham, and appears to have been the source for the name. "Figulus," in either Latin (Figulinus, or Figulus) or Portuguese, Spanish or Italian, always refers to the potter's craft, a worker in clay, or related definitions. "Figulinus" (also as "Figulus") refers to a potter, the potter's art, his workshop, or in general, earthenware. The name is probably a pun on the surname of Potter. "Figuline" refers also to pottery, or pottery clay.

4. Original plans and construction: From all evidence, mainly photographic, the building has retained its original 1893 plan with only minor alterations. The house was originally of the same wood frame covered with cypress shakes. The hardware and, significantly, the large plate-glass windows, are original. The grounds have included since 1893 or before, the channel in Lake Worth, the pier, and the main house with servants' quarters attached. In constructing the house, the building material was shipped by rail and water. The Florida East Coast Railway had not yet been built beyond Jacksonville in 1892-93; therefore the material had to be taken off the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railroad at Titusville, and shipped by the Indian River Steamboat Company to the head of the Jupiter-Lake Worth Railroad (called the "Celestial Railroad,") from Jupiter to Juno on Lake Worth. From there the material had to be shipped again by boat, south on the lake, to Figulus.
5. Alterations and additions: Sometime since 1934 the original cypress shakes on the roof were changed to composition shingles over the roof vents. The two second-floor porches on the northeast and southeast were added sometime after 1928. The west porch was screened sometime between 1928 and 1934, and the east porch was screened sometime between 1903 and 1928. The east porch had a short balustrade along its northern end which was removed sometime since 1928. The west porch's balustrade was removed in order to put in the screening.

The servants' wing may have suffered damage in a fire during the 1930s. If so, by all photographic evidence, the wing was repaired or rebuilt in its original condition. Only two exterior differences were noted: from the west porch, looking north, the wall of the kitchen area had a window in it in 1928 that it does not have now; also, the windows on the second floor, south end, servants' quarters, which were there in 1928, are not there now.

About 1919 electricity was supposed to have been brought in. The 1928 historic interior photographs show electric lights in all parts of the house except the sconces on the fireplace in the dining room, which have been electrified since. The entrance hanging lamp, which was once kerosene, and two wall kerosene lamps from the second-floor hall have been electrified and are presently in the possession of Mrs. John Lee.

The 1904 and 1928 historic interior photographs showed no handrail, although there was one after that. The modern folding doors from the foyer into the dining room and living rooms were also not there in 1928, when the openings were closed with curtains hung from rods on the foyer side of the doors. Also in the living room the three panels of floral wallpaper above the fireplace were there in 1928. The decorative door on the west wall, leading to the den, had been added after 1928. The addition of the den extension, about 1929, brought the closing up of the southwest door from the living room onto the porch.

The southeast corner of the den was originally intact and contained a window on the south and one on the east. Sometime after 1928 this wall was taken out and an extra room added. This is believed to have been done in 1929.

In the dining room the fireplace was the same in 1928 except that the sconces have been electrified since then.

On the second floor, where straw matting exists, it was original to the year 1928.

In the northeast bedroom there was a door in 1928 where a later bathroom door exists today, but the existence of the bathroom at that time is uncertain.

In the southwest bedroom, everything on the south wall was the same in 1928, and the bathroom is plainly visible in the photograph.

On the grounds of the house the pier has been changed since 1928 with the addition of a boat house. The coconut palms were not added until the turn of the century. In 1899 there were no coconut palms on the east or west sides, however by 1903 there were palms on the west and a few on the east. By 1928, in photographs showing hurricane damage, there were many palms on both the east and the west.

Both the east and west side of the grounds have had extensive lawns since 1896, with the present walkways included. The southwest walk curves down to the pier, and the east walk runs straight from the porch to the beach.

B. Historic Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

There was a post office created on January 7, 1886, in the same area as the house "Figulus." This refers back to the period when Dr. R. B. Potter owned the land which he later sold to the Bingham.

Charles William Bingham and wife, Mary Payne Bingham, of Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio, had a winter cottage in Palm Beach in 1893-94. Mary Bingham's first trip to Florida had been in 1893 also, but it was to their new winter estate at Figulus. Mary Bingham came with her son Oliver Payne Bingham in 1893 in order to find a better winter climate for him. Oliver was suffering from endocarditis which he developed after having scarlet fever. This trip is recorded in the statement including information on the builder of Figulus. The date 1893 is verified by the fact that the trip was made when the Florida East Coast Railroad Line was being extended from Jupiter to the Palm Beach area. This extension was begun in 1893 and completed in April of 1894.

Mr. and Mrs. C. W. Bingham's daughter Frances Payne Bingham went the first time to Figulus when she was 15 years old in the season of 1896, and again in the season of 1897. Frances was to become the wife of the future congressman Chester Castle Bolton and later congresswoman herself, after her husband's death. (She also owned the estate built just south of Figulus, called Casa Apava, recorded as HABS No. FLA-232.)

Figulus was supplied fresh water by a windmill, which was just north-east of the house in 1896. A large citrus grove and other tropical plants were cultivated from the beginning. Oliver Payne Bingham is said to have been the main figure in encouraging the accumulation of these plants, many of which would have come through the auspices of David Fairchild. David Grandison Fairchild (1869-1954) who preferred to omit his middle name altogether, was the noted horticulturalist and agricultural explorer and writer who organized (1895) and later directed (1906-1928) the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Plant Introduction (in Miami on Brickel Avenue), later to become a part of the Bureau of Plant Industry. Dr. Fairchild's name is commemorated in Miami's Fairchild Tropical Gardens. In the 1920s Dr. Fairchild and his station served to distribute tropical plants, newly introduced to the United States, to any and all interested Floridians for their grounds and estates. In the case of the Bingham-Blossom estate, the plantings including many exotic hardwoods, came by steam launch, sailboat, or by foot carriers along the Jungle Trail or the Beach of Lake Worth.

On January 29, 1898, Mary Payne Bingham died at Figulus. By 1899 Charles W. Bingham was part owner in a pineapple plantation on the present West Palm Beach Airport grounds. Oliver died at Figulus on February 11, 1900. In March 1903, C. W. Bingham bought Pelican Island lying just off Figulus, in Lake Worth, from Dr. R. B. Potter, the original owner of the Figulus land area. Dudley S. Blossom and family inherited the property at the death of C. W. Bingham.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Series of photographs taken in 1928, now in the possession of Mrs. John Lee (Mary Blossom Lee) of Riviera Beach, Florida.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Genealogical chart found hanging in house (Figulus).
Last entries show family of Dudley S. Blossom.

Bingham Family Album, in the possession of Mary Blossom Lee (Mrs. John Lee), of Riviera Beach, Florida, the granddaughter of Charles W. Bingham). [Old Views.]

Interview with Mary Blossom Lee (Mrs. John A. Lee), the former Mrs. Ben P. Gale.

Telephone interview with Dr. John Popenoe of Fairchild Tropical Gardens, Miami, Florida.

Telephone interview with Thomas H. Gale (son of Mary Blossom Lee, the former Mrs. Ben P. Gale), Eversley Farm, Centreville, Maryland.

b. Secondary and published sources:

The Blossom Estate (Figulus), Palm Beach County Historical Society Open House Benefit, Jan. 17, 1965.

Bradbury, Alfred G., and E. Story Hallock. A Chronology of Florida Post Offices, Handbook #2. The Florida Federation of Stamp Clubs, 1962.

Hoffstot, Barbara D. Landmark Architecture of Palm Beach. Pittsburgh: Ober Park Associates, Inc., Copyright 1974, Mrs. Henry P. Hoffstot.

Loth, David. A Long Way Forward: The Biography of Congresswoman Frances Payne Bolton. New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1957.

Map of Palm Beach and Surrounding Area. West Palm Beach: The Currie Investment Company, West Palm Beach, Florida, Emil A. Ehmann, Architect, West Palm Beach. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., Copyright 1907.

Palm Beach Daily News, VII: No. 60, p. 2, March 28, 1903;
IV: No. 18, p. 6, February 13, 1900.

Palm Beach Villas, II. Palm Beach, Davies Publishing Co., Inc., publisher of Palm Beach Daily News--Palm Beach Life, 1934. [Old Views]

Pierce, Charles W. Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida. Edited by Donald Walter Curl. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural merit and interest: This large residence, the first privately owned residence built on the ocean in Palm Beach is an excellent example of the Shingle style, expertly adapted to the site and to the climate, to provide comfort without air conditioning. It faces both west to Lake Worth, and east to the ocean.
2. Condition of fabric: Although the house appears to be structurally sound, exposure to the salt air and spray has caused much deterioration on exterior finishes, particularly in the exposed decks, soffits, and porch beams. [See Addendum.]

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The house has an 86' (seven-bay front) eastern facade (north-south direction) increased to approximately 152' when the semi-detached service wing on the north and the small wing on the south is included in the measurements. The east-west directional measurement is 50'. The main house has two full stories with high attic, the service wing has two stories, but is expressed as an apparent one-story cottage with three dormers on each slope of the gabled roof.

The main house is basically rectangular with two projecting wings forming a shallow U. The service wing is rectangular, attached to the main house by a flat-roofed link which may have been a breeze-way at one time.

2. Foundations: These are rectangular concrete piers with latticed panels between.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: The walls are sheathed with cypress shakes stained brown. The walls on all sides are articulated horizontally by a molded course integral with window sills at both floors. In addition, a continuous flat wood girt with a small crown mold is expressed and integral with the heads of the first-floor windows. The shingled walls are flared between the sills of the second-floor screened porches, and the edge of the wide overhanging eaves at the first floor.
4. Structural system, framing: Walls are wood framed; the main gable roof is framed with 2" x 10" rafters. It is reported that the house is anchored to the coral rock sub-strata by iron chains.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The main entrance porch on the west, faces Lake Worth. It is recessed under the second story except for a 6'-6" projection in the center bays.

Two 6'-0" bays flank an 11'-6" central bay to create an accent at the entrance with full-width steps leading to a concrete stoop. This porch is now screened from porch to ceiling, and the balustrade indicated in an 1896 photograph has been removed. Above the projection is a balustraded flat roof. The balusters are delicately turned spindles. The railing curves upward to the beveled square posts. Floors and ceiling are of wood, the latter being vee-joint tongue-and-groove.

The east porch surrounds the north and south walls of the house. The end bays are screened. Except for the center bay, the remaining bays have a balustrade of plain square balusters. The wood entrance steps are not original. The porch is 12'-0" deep, beyond which the overhang extends.

A former porch on the southwest side of the house has been converted to a den for Mr. Bingham, the floors being leveled on the interior. However, the edge of the original sloping porch floor is exposed beyond the exterior wall. Openings between the shingled piers have been glazed. This wing which projects 8'-0" from the house is two stories high, and at the upper story it interrupts a bracketed bay window--evidence that at least the upper part was an addition.

On the second-floor east front, screened porches were added at the north and south ends of the house. They do not appear in 1928 views of the house. These porches, with the flared shingle walls below the screens, project beyond the plane of the hipped-roof central bay of the house. Floors and ceilings are wood. Each porch is equipped with a transverse roll-up wood partition to divide them at mid-point. The partition disappears into a paneled box dropped transversely from the ceiling.

There is also a 12'-0" deep screened porch on the east side of the service wing, with the wood posts set back 3'-0" from the exterior wall. This wall is screened above a paneled wood wall. The floor is asphalt tile and the ceiling is typical vee-joint. A screened door on the north leads to the exterior.

6. Chimneys: Two stuccoed chimneys are placed off center of the roof ridge at the north and south ends of the house. There is a new brick chimney on the west wall of the service wing.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance doorway on the west porch is recessed 3'-6" from the main wall of the house. There is no exterior trim. The double doors each contain a single 21" x 54" light over a wood panel. A similar door leads from this porch to the dining room.

At the north end, a one-paneled door leads to the powder room. At the opposite end, a five-paneled door leads to the den. The main entrance door on the east porch is a duplicate of the west doors. On the east wall of the den there are two sets of similar openings, one within the screened porch and the other on the exterior south. The 10-light wood door is flanked by hinged sidelights, full height, and out-swinging. There is a fixed transom over the ensemble. On the second floor, original windows on the east have been replaced by French doors to the screened porches. The southernmost and northernmost doors on the respective porches have five lights, 14-1/2" x 16". The remaining doors on each porch have five lights, 17" x 16". The doors on the porch in the service wing are wood with a single 28" x 28" light over three panels, except for a pair of French doors with ten lights, 10" x 13".

- b. Windows and shutters: The house is notable for unusually large windows which flood the interior with light and air, as well as provide magnificent views of the lake on the west and the ocean on the east. The fixed plate-glass windows are unique for their size, and the time and place. The largest of these is 6'-7" wide and 5'-1" high, their being one each in the east wall of the living room and the dining room. Two others, 5'-7" x 5'-1", occur in the south wall of the living room and the west wall of the den. Other windows which are original are wood, double-hung, one-over-one lights, 43" x 31", all on the first floor except in the den. Here, on the south wall are casements with six lights, 11" x 14", and on the west wall casements with six lights, 7" x 13", with overhead transom.

On the south floor on the east wall there is a group of four double-hung windows, one-over-one, with 61" x 31" lights. In the west wall, windows in the glazed gallery are similar with 40" x 41" lights.

On the upstairs porches, wood casements have four lights each with three lights, 14" x 16" over one light, 14" x 12". Solid wood storm shutters are in place. Each gable wall in the attic has a single diamond-paned window under fixed wood louvers.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: There is a high gabled roof over the main house into which is framed the hipped roof of the projecting center bay on the east, and two end projections on the west. The original wood shake roofing shown in earlier photographs has been replaced with composition shingles. Flat roofs over the east porches and the link to the service wing are covered with built-up roofing. The service-wing roof is gabled.

- b. Cornice and eaves: The eave overhangs approximately 2'-6", the soffit is vee-joint boards with screened vents. There is a small-scaled cornice molding.
- c. Dormers: Early photographs show small circular roof ventilators on the slopes of the gabled roof which were not replaced when the present roof was installed. Three dormers occur on each slope of the service wing.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. On the first floor the main house is essentially a linear arrangement of three rooms; the living room on the south separated by a wide central hall from the dining room on the north. The den is situated on the southwest corner of the living room. A corresponding projection on the northwest corner of the dining room provides a powder room and a pantry which connects to the kitchen and service wing on the north. The wing consists of a linear arrangement of rooms on the west wall flanking the east porch. Thus all rooms have openings for cross ventilation on the east and west. Stairs on the north wall of the central hallway lead to the second floor.
 - b. On the second floor, stairs arrive at a large central space with two bedrooms on each side. A glazed corridor along the west wall provides access to these bedrooms as well as a southwest bedroom over the den, and a maid's room on the northwest.
2. Stairways: The dogleg main stairway in the central hall has nine risers in each flight. The newel posts are square, 7'-0" high, terminating in a pyramidal taper 1'-0" above a molded band. The face of the newel and the taper is treated with two incised grooves, and painted white. The varnished handrail of the balustrade reaches upward to meet the newel at the molding. Four small-scaled spindle-like balusters, painted white, are set on each 12" tread. It should be noted that these same balusters are used on the balustrade over the west porch. The wall handrail, which does not appear in 1928 photographs, is supported by large painted metal brackets. There is a small closet under the landing. The soffit under the second flight is paneled and terminates at the ceiling with two square beveled pendants.

3. First-floor rooms:

- a. Central hallway: This room extends through the house east-to-west. Floors are dark stained wood. Walls are covered with reeded wallpaper. The ceiling is painted plaster with a small-scaled cornice molding. The 12" baseboard has an astragal molding

over an 8" flat member. The wide cased openings to the living room and the dining room on the south and north, respectively, contain modern fold doors. A wood panel is located below the window on the east.

5. Living room: Floors, baseboard and cornice are similar to those in the hallway. Walls are papered and ceilings are plastered. There is an unusual decorative door, 8'-0" high, on the west wall leading to the den. The single full-height glass pane is treated with an appliqué of glass photographic negatives, held in place by a black metal fretwork, presenting the appearance of leaded stained glass.

The fireplace on the south wall is faced with Roman brick framed by plain wood trim painted white. The bracketed mantel with dentil molding extends over the wide fireplace opening. Above it, wood colonettes support a second shelf with bead-and-reel molded edge. The three panels thus framed are decorated with floral paper

- c. Den: Floors, walls, and ceiling are similar to those in the living room, except that a picture molding is located 6" below the ceiling in that part of the room which appears to be the earliest. Door and window trim consists of three flat elements with astragal edge. In the older section there is wood paneling below the windows.
- d. Dining room: Floors, baseboard, and cornice are similar to those in other first-floor rooms. All walls are papered except for the painted plaster wall on the west. Ceiling is painted plaster. Wood paneling replaces the plaster below the windows.

The fireplace is faced for its full 8'-0" height with Roman brick surrounded by a simple wood molding painted white, a slight convex curve with a simple dentil trim at the top. A small recessed mantel on a single central bracket is the same width as the fire opening, and framed with simple wood molding, the space within filled with wood paneling painted white.

- e. Service area: This is a linear arrangement of service rooms, all of which have asphalt tile floors. There is a brick fireplace with a simple wood mantel in the servants' parlor. A secondary stairway leads to the servants' bedrooms above.

4. Second-floor rooms:

- a. Stair Hall and west gallery: The wide stair hall extends through the house in an east-west direction. It opens on the west to the glazed gallery which extends along the west wall.

Floors are of unfinished pine covered with straw matting which is tacked down. Walls are papered up to a picture molding, above which it is plastered and coved to meet the modified tray ceiling. Doors to the bedrooms are louvered in the hallway and a second set of wood paneled doors are installed inside the bedroom, thus providing both ventilation and privacy. At the north end of the gallery is a utility service stair.

- b. North bedroom: Flooring is also unfinished pine here, covered with straw matting which is tacked down. The 12' baseboard is similar to that on the first floor. Walls and coved ceiling are similar to that in the stair hall. Interior doors are of wood, with five panels.

The fireplace is faced with unglazed rectangular tiles, framed by fluted square columns extending above the mantel. Above the mantel is a horizontal wood panel and four wood brackets supporting an intermediate wood shelf. A third shelf is supported by the square columns.

- c. North-central and south-central bedrooms: Finishes are the same as in the north bedroom. There are no fireplaces in these rooms.
- d. South bedroom: The pine floor is varnished and exposed. Walls, ceiling and openings are similar to the north bedroom.

The fireplace is faced with glazed square tiles surrounded by broad flat wood trim. The mantel is supported by a center bracket. A second shelf with dentil edge is supported by four brackets.

- e. Southwest bedroom: The exposed pine floor, walls, ceiling, and openings are similar to those in the other bedrooms, except at the bay window on the south wall. A molded wood valence frames the bay which has a paneled soffit.

The fireplace on the east wall is faced with unglazed square tiles. The wood mantel with dentil edge is supported by wood brackets. Above is a full-width mirror and a shelf supported by fluted pilasters and edged with egg-and-dart molding.

- f. Service bedrooms: Floors are wood. Walls are papered above a 3'-6" wainscot of beaded, tongue-and-groove, vertical boards. Above the picture molding is a modified painted and plastered tray ceiling. Several doors have adjustable wood louvers.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting: Situated between the Atlantic Ocean on the east and Lake Worth and U. S. Highway 1A (South County Road) on the west, Figulus has maintained a remarkable balance between natural and controlled landscaping.

2. Historic landscape design: Well-maintained grass lawns on the east and west sides of the house are contrasted with the wild thick natural growth on the north and south. The lawn on the west extends across the highway to the lake, bordered by ficus (fig trees), banyan, and palms. The semi-natural environment is maintained and augmented by the addition of specimens adaptable to the native scene. The clear division of ecological differences is noticeable in the zones of landscaping. On the east, exposed to the ocean and salt spray, coconut palms, Australian pines, and seagrape predominate. Beyond, to the west, are found the specimens native to jungles: hardwoods, banyan, ficus, poinciana, wild orchids, and imported vines. On the west lakeside are the wild-life refuges--a chain of islands thick with mangrove. Cultivated areas are the citrus groves, vegetable and cutting gardens within a fenced area.
3. Outbuildings: North of the main house on the ocean is a cottage originally intended for the caretaker but now used as a guest house. The caretaker now resides in a house near the entrance to the property at the northwest corner of the grounds. In the same vicinity are the garages.

[NOTE: Since 1971 the house has been seriously damaged by fire and subsequently demolished and the site cleared, except for the plantings. It is believed by the owner that the site remaining will qualify for a Natural Historic Site.]

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Florida project to survey the historic architecture of Palm Beach and to emphasize written historical and architectural data was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Historical Society of Palm Beach County and the Florida Board of Archives and History in the summer of 1971. Under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS, the project was carried out in the Historic American Buildings Survey field office in the Flagler Museum, Whitehall Way, Palm Beach, with Professor Woodrow W. Wilkins, AIA (University of Miami) Project Supervisor; Richard C. Crisson, Architect (University of Florida); Richard High, Student Architect (Georgia Institute of Technology); and Bryan Bowman, Student Historian (University of Florida). Under John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS from March 1972, additional documentation was prepared and archival photographs for the project were taken in April 1972 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS photographer, and editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office in 1980 by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.

ADDENDUM TO:
BINGHAM-BLOSSOM HOUSE
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HABS No. FL-221

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